

The following is the full transcript of a press conference Congressman Pence participated in on April 1 in Baghdad with Senator John McCain:

BRIEFING BY SENATOR JOHN MCCAIN (R-AZ); SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM (R-SC); REPRESENTATIVE MIKE PENCE (R-IN); REPRESENTATIVE RICK RENZI (R-AZ) TOPIC: THEIR VISIT TO IRAQ LOCATION: THE COMBINED PRESS INFORMATION CENTER, BAGHDAD, IRAQ TIME: 9:30 A.M. EDT DATE: SUNDAY, APRIL 1, 2007

SEN. MCCAIN: Well, good afternoon. I'm Senator John McCain from Arizona, and I'm joined by Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, Congressman Rick Renzi of Arizona and Congressman Mike Pence of Indiana.

We've had a very full and interesting day since we got here. We -- after landing at the airport, we drove from the airport into various parts of the city, where we stopped at Babel Shiroi (sp) market, where we spent well over an hour shopping and talking with the local people and getting their views and ideas about different issues of the day.

Then we went to the Karrada joint security station, a new joint security station manned by U.S. and Iraqi military, where we had a chance not only to meet American military but also the Iraqi military who are there as well.

I believe that we have a new strategy that is making progress, and it's not to say that things are well everywhere in Iraq; far from it. We have a long way to go. We read every day about suicide bombings and kidnappings, rocket attacks and other terrible acts. And I'm not saying that "mission is accomplished" or "last throes" or a few "dead-enders."

But what we don't read about every day and what is news since the surge began is a lot of good news: the drop in murders in Baghdad, the establishment of security outposts throughout the city, the deal among Anbar's sheikhs to fight back against al Qaeda, the deployment of additional Iraqi brigades to Baghdad, and the increase in actionable intelligence being provided to U.S. and Iraqi forces. These and other indicators are reasons for cautious -- very cautious -- optimism about the effects of the new strategy. I believe that just as we read about all the negative events in Iraq, the American people must be aware of the positive developments under this new plan, and the media, I believe, has a responsibility to report all aspects of what's taking place here in Iraq.

I ask my -- Senator Graham.

SEN. GRAHAM: Well, thank you.

This is my -- I think my sixth trip back to Iraq, and one thing that I've learned over the years here is that we've paid a heavy price, the Iraqis and the United States, for letting things get out of control, for not having enough people on the ground early on. But what we're doing today is different, and to say it's not different is just really not being fair.

We have a fundamentally different approach to our security problems. We're doing now what

we should have done three years ago, and there is some signs of success.

Two things. We cannot let suicide bombers, homicide bombers and car bombers set the pace for the 21st century. We cannot let them determine the future of the Iraqi people or the future of the American people. And it's a resilient people here in Iraq. We went to the market, and we were just really warmly welcomed. I bought five rugs for five bucks, and people were engaging. And just a few weeks ago, hundreds of people, dozens of people were killed in this same place.

So to my American constituents out there who may be listening, there are plenty of people here in Iraq who want the same thing for their families that you want for yours, and they're dying for their freedom. We met the Iraqi police commander, who was very optimistic that this new strategy is paying dividends. So is it tough? Yes. Is it hopeless? No. If we're patient as a nation and we stand by the Iraqi people, who are fighting and dying for their freedom, we will win this war. If we talk about leaving and losing, the car bombers win.

REP. RENZI: Thank you.

I would just add a couple of little points. When we were there at the marketplace, we had an opportunity to go to the very spot where just back in February over 240 lives were lost with a major car bomb. And on that very spot, we saw the entrepreneurs and we saw the small business spirit. We saw people rebuilding. One of the ladies came out and asked if we were from the government, because she had put in her application for the grant money and for the compensation that they're waiting for to help rebuild. And so you're also seeing not just a military solution but you're seeing that political -- and you're seeing that rebuilding that we've been talking about. We had an Iraqi interpreter from the Iraqi army with us, and one the gentlemen patting him on his back said this is our future, this is our hope. And that word "hope" is really key by mothers and fathers and dads and families downtown at that marketplace, all that hustle and bustle, embracing hope -- it really needs to be a message that goes back so that we do have that endurance and that will to stay and to be part of this hope and not just turn our backs and leave these people in despair. So I just want to share that message of hope.

Now my colleague --

REP. PENCE: I'm Mike Pence from the state of Indiana, and it's an honor for me to travel with Senator McCain. And I, too, find myself leaving my day at the market in Baghdad with a new sense of cautious optimism, that freedom might just work here in Baghdad for these good people.

It was extraordinary as we were -- as we toured a forward operating base, one of dozens here in the city, joint operating bases with Iraqi and U.S. personnel.

But the most deeply moving thing for me was to mix and mingle unfettered among ordinary Iraqis at a seemingly endless street market; to stop, to have Chi tea, to haggle over the price of a rug, and then again and again and again to see people touch their hearts and nod and greet us warmly as friends. It was deeply moving to me to see the genuine kindness and welcome that was extended to our American delegation and, more importantly, to all the American

soldiers who walked with us through those streets.

The fight is far from over. The enemy is tenacious. But I believe and I believe I have seen today evidence that the surge in cooperation with Iraqi forces is making a difference on the ground. Peace and stability are coming to Baghdad, and I believe if we will remain determined and fixed and believe in these good people, freedom will prevail in this place.

Q The way I see American soldiers in Iraq is that they're just incredible. They're so skilled, they're so dedicated, they're -- Americans -- a whole generation of Americans that we can be totally proud of, and they are the light brigade. They're -- you know, the cannons to the left them, as Alfred Lloyd Tennyson said, cannons to the right of them, and somebody had blundered.

They're here, but the original premise of this war was a blunder, and what I you to know is, if you guys are planning on attacking Iran -- and I just -- what do you have to say to that? Would that be another -- that sounds like another blunder.

SEN. MCCAIN: I have no response.

Is there a question?

Yes, sir.

Q (Through interpreter.) (Name inaudible) -- from the Iraqi newspaper. In fact, the insistence of the U.S. Congress for President Bush to withdraw the American forces from Iraq at the time that no strong Iraqi army exists -- don't you find this a cause for internal slaughters by the terrorists?

SEN. GRAHAM: As you are understanding here in Iraq, democracy is difficult. In our system of government, the Congress has an opportunity to make statements through the appropriations process. And the president has the opportunity to disagree by vetoing something the Congress might try to enact in law.

I think you see four people here who believe now more than ever, it would be a huge mistake to set a deadline, because it is working. There are signs of progress. We're doing now what we should have done three years ago. And if you set a deadline now, it will undercut everything positive going on.

That's not me saying that; that's every soldier I've talked to today. That's the Iraqi police commander who said, please stay with us; things are getting better. The Iraqi people want to chart their own destiny, but they don't have the capability yet. The wolves of terrorism are still howling.

So back home, come over here before you vote again; sit down with these soldiers and experience it for yourself. The president will veto any bill with a deadline. He should, and hope that Congress will have the good judgment to listen to our military commanders, those on the ground, and give this a chance to go forward without deadlines and timelines, which cut the legs

out from under the military trying to win this war.

Q Senator McCain, you've been a staunch supporter of the military effort here, but General Petraeus --

SEN. MCCAIN: Not really. For three years, I was a very severe critic of the military effort here.

Q The current military effort, the surge.

SEN. MCCAIN: The current -- yes, sir.

Q General Petraeus, who is in charge of that surge, has made it clear that this war cannot be won militarily, only politically.

SEN. MCCAIN: I don't know anyone else who -- I don't know anyone who disagrees with that.

Q Is there anything you've seen on your current trip to encourage you that the Iraqi politicians are ready to make the steps necessary to solve this war? SEN. MCCAIN: I apologize for interrupting you.

I have seen some signs of progress -- the commitment of the Iraqi military, which was done by their government, the commitment to pass a de-Ba'athification law, the commitment and initial stages of passage of the oil revenue sharing laws and several other indicators.

But is it still a question mark as to whether the Iraqi government will do everything that's necessary? I can't guarantee that. I also can't guarantee that the military effort will succeed either, but I do believe that some of the steps the Maliki government has taken are encouraging. But they have a long way to go.

Thank you.

Anymore?

Q Senator McCain, I just read on the Internet that you said there are areas in Baghdad that you can walk around freely.

SEN. MCCAIN: Yeah, I just was -- came from one.

Q Pardon me?

SEN. MCCAIN: I just came from one.

Q Yeah. Which areas would that be?

SEN. MCCAIN: Sir, what I said was that there is encouraging signs and that things are better. Things are better, and there are encouraging signs. I have been here many years -- many times

over the years; never have I been able to drive from the airport, never have I been able to go out into the city as I was today.

So my response to you is that things are better. There are encouraging signs. But I am not saying mission accomplished, last throes, deadenders, any of that. It's long and it's hard and it's very, very difficult; a very, very difficult task ahead of us. But I don't believe that -- I believe that the signs are encouraging.

But please don't interpret one comment of mine in any way to indicate that this isn't a long, difficult struggle that we're in with lots more car bombings, lots more of the terrorist acts that have taken place. But the American people are not getting the full picture of what's happening here. They are not getting the full picture of the drop in murders, the establishment of security outposts throughout the city, the situation in Anbar province, the deployment of additional Iraqi brigades who are performing well, and other signs of progress that have been made.

Q (Through interpreter.) (Name and affiliation inaudible) -- federal newspaper. How accurate the propagandists and some of the statements by the American members of Congress that America is behind establishing a safe area for the Christians in the northern part of Iraq?

SEN. MCCAIN: I've never heard of such a thing nor would I contemplate such a thing, and I'm sure the American government would never count on such a thing.

Yes, ma'am.

Q Senator, you went to a market today, and I'm sure you were under heavy guard. And the violence is down a bit in Baghdad, and there is a lot of troops here, but violence meanwhile is on the rise in other parts of Iraq. Do you have confidence that the security plan can work? A lot of commanders have talked about, you know, putting down the violence in one spot, only to see it prop up in another. What gives you that confidence?

SEN. MCCAIN: General Petraeus is very pleased with the progress that is being made. He realized that it's long and hard and difficult. I realize that it's long and hard and difficult. I study warfare. I am a student of history. If you control the capital city of a nation, you have a significant advantage. Are there going to be acts of terror in other places? Absolutely. Is it going to be difficult? Yes. Are there going to be more of the IEDs and more assassinations? Yes. But the American people are not getting the full picture, in my opinion, as to some of the progress that's being made here.

Yes.

Q Hi. Lourdes --

SEN. MCCAIN: Would you identify yourself as to who you represent, you know?

Q Hi. Lourdes Garcia-Navarro, National Public Radio. Again for Senator McCain -- and I hate to bring this back to comments that you made, but in comments that you made on CNN, you said

that General Petraeus (wandered out ?) in an unarmed humvee, and I'd like to bring it back to you. What kind of security -- what kind of security --

SEN. MCCAIN: General Petraeus goes -- General Petraeus goes to -- goes downtown almost every day, and of course he has protection, and we had protection today.

Things are getting better in Iraq, and I am pleased with the progress that has been made. And I will continue to be pleased at the progress. I hope that the significant drop in murders -- I'll be glad to go through that list and others with you, if you would like. But I am very glad that we have made the progress that we have made, and there's a lot more to go, and it's long and it's hard and it's difficult. I think the American people are not getting the full picture of what's happening here.

SEN. GRAHAM: Can I just add to that?

You know, this is my sixth trip, and along the way, I've gone from the first time, where we went over to the hotel across the street and bought rugs -- there were two cars with us. And in between then and now, we were in tanks and couldn't move around and felt under siege.

Is Baghdad dangerous?

Yes. But I have seen things different than my last trip here. This surge, to me, has a very good chance of bringing security. The Iraqi commanders that we have met with, who are now sharing space with the American military, seem to be more empowered. And every person that I had lunch with today, all the military members -- I asked them, "How many times have you been here?" Almost all have been here twice. Three have been four times. And each person said that the Iraqi military capability was better.

So it goes back to who we're going to allow to define this war: the fanatics who want to just blindly kill people or the folks who will go back to that same market four weeks later and bring their kids and shop and try to do business and say thank you to us.

This is a great struggle, and we've made tremendous mistakes, and we're finally getting it right. And is it too little, too late? I don't know, but I don't think so.

So yes, in my opinion, things are better today than they've ever been since I came here three, four years ago. And it's due to the fact that we've made a new strategy with a new commander.

REP. PENCE: I'd like to speak to the conditions of our travel. We did travel down to the area in humvees, armored humvees. Fortunately, I think, by virtue of congressional support, all the humvees are armored.

What was striking to me, just as an observer, was to see General Petraeus take off a helmet and put on a soft cap and then instruct each one of us, at our discretion, to do the same. We retained our body armor for -- at the instruction of our security detail.

But I have to tell you -- and there was some video journalism that was done there, and you can see for yourself -- there -- we moved and mingled among some of the warmest and most welcoming people that I've ever met on the face of the Earth -- one person after another, boys and girls, moms and dads, elderly people, brushing past the soldiers to approach us, put their hands on their hearts. There was -- one gentleman tried to refuse our money when we were purchasing rugs. He kept touching his heart, said, "Thank you, no, no," and I was deeply moved by that.

I just -- I was -- I candidly was not prepared for -- to find a marketplace where thousands and thousands of Iraqis were moving about in regular, everyday life, like a normal outdoor market in Indiana in the summertime, doing so in safety because of the efforts of U.S. and Iraqi personnel in adding barriers and hardening those areas so they wouldn't be susceptible to terrorists.

And I also wasn't prepared for the generous and warm and welcoming spirit that we encountered.

SEN. MCCAIN: Thank you very much.

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